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THE PRESS

HAND-ME-DOWN SCOOP

ON FEBRUARY 13 *New York Times* reporter Leslie Gelb reported that the United States had contingency plans to place nuclear depth bombs (like anti-submarine depth charges, only nuclear) in Canada, Iceland, Bermuda, and Puerto Rico and that these countries were upset at the prospect—particularly as they had never been consulted by the United States. Gelb's story was particularly infuriating to the Reagan administration not only because the *Times* spurned Secretary of State George Shultz's personal request not to run the story, but also because Gelb was the director of the State Department's Bureau of Political Military Affairs during the Carter administration. Gelb's successor, Lt. Gen. John Chain, retaliated by ordering his staff not to talk to Gelb anymore and by removing Gelb's photograph from display in the State Department.

Chain was courteous enough to provide a public explanation for his actions. He put a little notice in place of Gelb's photograph, inscribed in beautiful copperplate handwriting, that read: "Removed For Cause. The P. M. Director, 1977 to 1979, did willingly, willfully, and knowingly publish, in 1985, classified information the release of which is harmful and damaging to the country." (Last week, after taking much abuse in the press, Chain restored Gelb to the good graces of the State Department. Gelb's picture, though, remains in storage.)

A lively debate has since ensued over whether disclosing contingency plans to put nuclear depth bombs on distant islands was in fact telling the Russians something new, and whether the countries involved had good reason to be taking umbrage. It seems to me, however, that General Chain has inadvertently raised important questions, not about the smaller details of nuclear war plans, but about the practice of journalism in America.

FIRST, WHY IS someone whose picture was hanging on a State Department wall working for *The New York Times*? The *Times*'s policy that government experience such as Gelb's can only enrich a reporter's understanding of the issues has already backfired once in the previous year. Last summer the *Post* scooped the *Times* by reporting that Carter administration officials, including Gelb, had prepared a memorandum in 1978 titled "Covert Action to Counter Anti-Neutron Bomb Forum." Gelb, of course, couldn't report the story because the memo is still classified. Two days later, the *Times* ran a lame follow-up story in which Gelb was interviewed by one of his colleagues. The story reported Gelb as saying "he did not know then, and does not know now, whether any covert effort was actually approved and carried out."

Second, and more important, did General Chain's heavy-handed interior decorating disclose, as *Times* editor A.M. Rosenthal asserted, "a lack of understanding of a free press and an astounding distortion of the facts"? General Chain surely knew, said Rosenthal, that "the story *The New York Times* published contained no information that had not already been published and debated in the countries named in the story. The only people from whom this information had been withheld were the American people."

Withheld? By whom? It is true that the story had already appeared in a multitude of newspapers outside the United States. But it was, in fact, the American media itself that "withheld" the story by showing a marked reluctance to have anything to do with it.

The main source for Gelb's article was William Arkin, a 28-year-old former Army intelligence analyst who in 1982 wrote a book with me on nuclear war plans. Arkin is now nuclear weapons researcher at the Institute for Policy Studies in Washington. Last year Arkin obtained a nine-year-old secret document relating to the Pentagon's Nuclear Weapons Deployment Plan—a classified memorandum, approved each year by the president, authorizing the deployment of nuclear weapons outside the United States. The document listed eight U.S. bases in the Azores, Bermuda, Canada, Iceland, the Philippines, Spain, Diego Garcia, and Puerto Rico, where the Pentagon had contingency plans to send, or maybe even had sent (no one knows because the Pentagon won't talk about it), B-57 nuclear depth bombs, each nearly the size of the Hiroshima bomb. Arkin tried to interest *Washington Post* reporter Walter Pincus in the document.

Pincus said later that he was skeptical about the newsworthiness of the deployment plan. He didn't think the depth bombs would be used in a nuclear war because they would blow out important underwater sensors used for tracking submarines. "I don't think the [depth bomb] plan is relevant to nuclear war; it's an interesting footnote," said Pincus.

Pincus has a point. If the idea is to deploy these weapons in a superpower crisis, one would imagine they are low down on the list of priorities. But Arkin argues that it is just these kind of tactical, rather than strategic, nuclear weapons that could be the first to be used by a president who has decided to cross the nuclear threshold. The policy behind the contigency planning is therefore of great import and should be a matter of public debate. Nevertheless, Pincus declined to write an article on the document.

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